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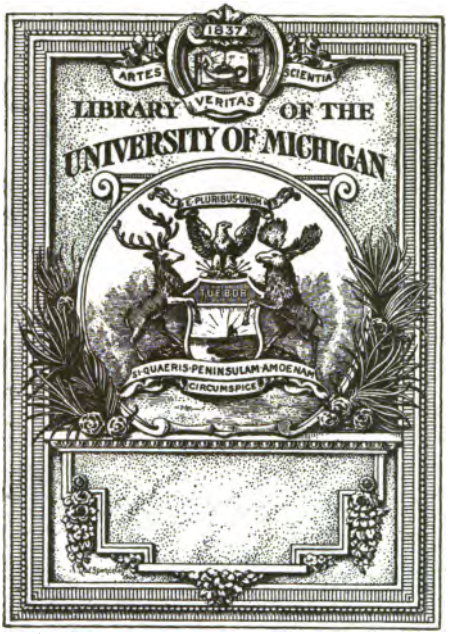
The Meaning and Value of Poetry

W. H. Hudson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THE MEANING

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AND

VALUE OF POETRY

BY

WILLIAM HENRY HUDSON

Author of "Studies in Interpretation," "Idle Hours in a Library," "Life of Sir Walter Scott," "The Study of English Literature," etc., etc.

NEW YORK

THOMAS Y. CROWELL & CO.

PUBLISHERS

1901

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THE MEANING AND VALUE OF POETRY.

THOSE of us who believe, heart and soul, in the supreme value of poetry are sometimes directly challenged to give reason for our faith. We are met with the question, "What is it, after all, that poetry is supposed to do for us?" "You talk much," we are occasionally told, "of the place and power of poetry, but you too often use a language which the ordinary man of the world, who knows little of philosophy, and cares nothing about æsthetics, finds it difficult to understand. Will you not condescend to translate your ideas out of your technical jargon into a more familiar tongue? What, in a word, do you mean by poetry, and why do you insist that it has such large and urgent claims upon our attention?"

To these direct and simple questions I am going to try to offer something in the way of a direct and simple reply. But, to begin with, we must endeavor clearly to define the issue before us. These questions are, in fact, objections in thin disguise; and it is, therefore, important that we should realize at the outset their sources and bearings.

In the first place, then, I fancy that, upon analysis, we shall find, in the majority of cases, that such objections are advanced out of a belief that the study of poetry cannot possibly be of service to anyone in the stress and strain of our great practical modern world. In one of Messrs. Besant and Rice's entertaining novels, there is a delightfully self-assertive youngster, Nick by name, who propounds with boyish vigor of phraseology a distinctly utilitarian theory of education. "Greek!" he was wont to say contemptuously, "What is the

use of Greek in the city? Who wants Greek in the army? Greek is invented for school-masters to pretend to be able to read it. Catch them reading Greek when no one's looking, or for their own pleasure! Yah! They can't do it. Latin again! Do the partners in the great city houses write Latin verses? Do they grind out exercises in the subjunctive mood? Do they make their clerks say the irregular verbs and the rules of syntax every morning? Gammon!" And the view which our young philosopher here expresses of the now much-maligned classical curriculum is substantially the view very widely held concerning the practical uselessness of all literary culture. "Of what advantage," it is asked, "is a love of poetry ever likely to be to the young man or woman whose career is to lie among ordinary every-day affairs?" And although educational theorists of the school of Bentham and young Nick do not close the discussion with an explosive "Yah!" or "Gammon!" it is Yah and Gammon that they mean, all the same.

In the second place, when the objection does not arise out of and express the narrowly utilitarian aims and materialistic ideals now commonly accepted in life and culture, it will almost certainly be found to arise out of and express the spirit of natural science now rapidly sweeping into every department of activity and thought. By many men of to-day, trained in the methods and wedded to the interests of science, poetry is regarded as only another name for the fanciful, the visionary, the extravagant, the overwrought. At best, such men will tell us, the poet does not enlighten, does not edify, does not add to the sum of our positive knowledge of man and nature; at worst, there is danger lest he should play tricks upon us, wrapping the world, by his spell, in a "moony vapor" of unreality, in which we are no longer able to discriminate between fact and fiction, between literal truth and the airy phan-

toms of the imagination. As a work of art, as a product of ingenuity and technical skill, his verse may have an esoteric interest, and even a kind of æsthetic value, for those whose tastes lie in such directions. But these will always constitute a mere handful in the great mass of mankind; and to consider poetry, for this great mass, as a means of culture, of discipline, of growth, is a delusion of the old humanism, to be discarded with so many other outworn traditions of the past. For all the purposes of life and character, the training and results of science are amply sufficient.

These two classes of objections, then, we shall have to hold in mind as we proceed to consider the general proposition that poetry is at bottom a serious thing, of value to us not only on account of its technical or artistic aspects, but also because it yields elements for culture which are afforded by no other line of study—elements which are vitally necessary for the rounding out and completion of our lives. Our aim must be to show, as against the practical exponents of a utilitarian civilization, that the study of poetry will furnish that which even the busiest man or woman of a busy age cannot with impunity neglect; and, as against the apostles of physical science, that it is in its own way every whit as important for humanity and its development as the special discipline given and the special results attained in their own laboratories and schools.

Now, in order to discuss this proposition intelligently, we must try, first of all, to understand what, in its essence, poetry really is. Let us clear the way at once by showing what, despite popular misconceptions, poetry really is not. It is not, as is commonly supposed, synonymous with rhyme and metre—that is, it is not the antithesis of prose. The proper antithesis of prose, as Wordsworth and Coleridge very justly pointed out, is not poetry, but verse; while the

proper antithesis of poetry is not prose, but science, or matter-of-fact. In these distinctions, it will be noted, we purposely disregard all questions of form that we may fix our attention the more steadily upon differences of spirit and meaning; for it is these differences which are fundamental. How it comes about that, in the average of cases, poetic passion finds a natural expression in rhythmical language—in other words, what are the subtle relationships of poetry and verse—is a problem full of psychological interest; but it is one which need not, and indeed must not, detain us here. For the moment, we want only to obviate the possibility of future confusion by realizing once and for all that when we speak of poetry we mean poetry as distinguished from science, and not metrical composition as distinguished from prose. It is, in fact, the essential antithesis between poetry and science which will become the text of much that we shall have to say a little later on.

With this distinction well in mind, we may now approach our subject from another point of view.

All literature, according to the familiar definition of Matthew Arnold, is substantially a "criticism of life," while poetry, as a division of literature, is a "criticism of life under the conditions fixed for such a criticism by the laws of poetic truth and poetic beauty." These phrases have given rise to a good deal of discussion, and if, as sometimes happens, they are set aside on the score of obscurity or extravagance, it is mainly because, while they exhibit their author's rare power of arresting attention, they fail somewhat of his customary felicity and sureness in hitting the mark. The idea of "criticism" here insisted upon as the central and characteristic element in literature was unfortunate. To Arnold himself, indeed, it carried a certain large and generous significance—it meant what "criticism" in his

vocabulary always meant—the free play of intelligence upon the world's facts and problems; or, as he elsewhere put it, "the noble and profound application of ideas to life." But most of his readers, indifferent to his special usage of the word, took "criticism" in its common colloquial sense, and then it brought into the mind the notions of deliberation, scrutiny, analysis, balanced judgment. And these notions do not at all fit into our general conceptions of the poet and his work. What, we say, with some surprise, did Homer "criticise" life in the *Iliad?* Did Sophocles "criticise" life in the *Antigone?* Did Shakspere "criticise" life in *Lear* or *Cymbeline?* Are we to accept *The Ancient Mariner*, or the *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, or *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, or *The Blessed Damozel* as "criticisms" of life? And we feel that we cannot so accept them without doing some violence to the phrase.

But it is the phrase only which is unsatisfactory. The idea underlying it—the idea for which it stood to Arnold himself—is at once sound and illuminating. Let us substitute for the word criticism the word interpretation—let us say, not that literature is substantially a criticism of life, but that it is substantially an interpretation of life—and most of the difficulty will immediately disappear. A great work of literature gives us the author's reading of the facts and problems of man and nature—gives us these things as they are seen from *his* point of view and through the atmosphere of *his* personality, *his* experiences, *his* faith—gives us, in a word, his interpretation of them under the forms and conditions of art. And in this sense all poetry *is* an interpretation of life, from the airiest love-song, from the most trivial bacchanalian lyric, up to the *Divine Comedy* of Dante and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In such interpretation, it is manifestly the personality which is of main account—the funda-

mental character of the poet himself. When a writer's knowledge of the world is slight and superficial, when his brain is unsteady, his feelings shallow, his judgment unsound, the interpretation of life which he offers us through his literature will likewise be slight and superficial, unsteady, shallow, unsound; and, of course, such an interpretation will have no great or enduring value for us. But when, on the other hand, his experience is broad and varied, his mind ripe, his feeling deep, his vision large and clear, then his interpretation will be broad, ripe, deep, large, clear; and such an interpretation, embodying the results of generous observation and wise thought, will have for us both great and enduring value. "Art," said George Eliot, "is a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellow-men"—let us say, with life at large, both of nature and humanity—"beyond the bounds of our personal lot." And through literature in particular do we thus amplify experience—do we thus get into touch with vast ranges of thought and feeling beyond the narrow horizons of our individual world.

Our definition of poetry as substantially an interpretation of life, though good so far as it goes, must, however, be supplemented by one very important consideration before it can be regarded as even approximately complete. But before we pass on to this, we may pause a moment to note the two large classes, or divisions, into which, roughly speaking, all poetry, as an interpretation of life, may be said to fall. To the one class or division belongs poetry which deals directly with thought and feeling—that is, poetry of the lyrical or reflective kind; to the other, poetry which deals indirectly with thought and feeling—that is, poetry of the narrative or dramatic kind. It is easy enough to understand the interpretative power of poetry belonging to the former division.

In Gray's *Elegy*, for instance, or Wordsworth's *Lines written above Tintern Abbey*, in Arnold's *Dover Beech*, or Mrs. Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the poet handles some of the great issues of life—the questions of man and God, love, conduct, destiny—in a personal and immediate way, making us the confidants of his meditations and heart-searchings, his fears and his hopes. But it is not so easy at first to appreciate the interpretative power of the poetry which falls into the other class. In what sense, we may ask, does Shakspere interpret life for us in *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*? Milton, in *Paradise Lost*? Tennyson, in the *Idylls of the King*? The answer is that in such cases the poet interprets life, not by what he says about it, but by his presentation of it. In his famous preface to Shakspere, Dr. Johnson, after his manner, threw special stress upon the instruction to be derived from the great playwright's works, upon "the practical axioms and domestic wisdom" with which they are filled, and upon the "system of civil and economical prudence" to be "collected" by careful study of them. Now we would insist at least as strongly as did Johnson upon Shakspere's marvellous sagacity, knowledge of men and motives, insight into character, breadth of vision, and, above all, morality. But we find the revelation of these things—we find the dramatist's "interpretation of life"—not where the critical exponent of the eighteenth century spirit sought it, in the formal philosophy and doctrinal purpose of the plays—in the real or imagined theses maintained and lessons conveyed by them; but in the balance and order of the world to which Shakspere introduces us, in his indirect presentation of thought and feeling, in his development of character and story, in his synthesis of the forces that go to make up our bewilderingly complex human life. The knowledge and wisdom of the centuries will often crystallize in his hands in a single aphor-

ism, a few lines, a word or two perhaps of final significance and power; and for such we are duly thankful. But, after all, it is not these gnomic utterances which strike down most deeply into the moral soil of life, it is not these pregnant aphorisms, therefore, which we care most about. Least of all do we believe that the best that Shakspere has to give us is to be reached and appropriated through any attempt, no matter how successful, to "collect" his "system of civil and economical prudence," and thus to compress the rich and varied meaning of his dramas into a series of cut-and-dried philosophical propositions. Shakspere interprets life, then, by his exhibition of life—by his representation of passion, by his portrayal of men and manners, his supreme mastery in laying bare the intricacies of motive and conduct. And what is true of the plays of Shakspere is likewise true of all the great works of imaginative literature, in which, as we have put it, the writer deals indirectly with thought and feeling —as in epic, drama, novel. In such cases the virtue, potency, validity of the interpretation given inhere almost wholly in organic structure and pervading spirit, and depend little, and often not at all, upon stated text or formulated doctrine.

So much it has seemed desirable to say to clear up a point which might otherwise have led to some difficulty. Let us understand, then, that when we speak of a poet's interpretation of life—of his morality, his purpose, his ethical power —we do not necessarily refer to his direct or conscious teaching. We have in view rather the vital meaning which is "wrought into the body and soul, the matter and tendency" of his work. In lyric and reflective poetry, then, we repeat, the poet will give us a direct expression of his reading of the facts and problems of existence. In impersonal poetry, on the contrary, we are mainly concerned, not with what he says about life, but what he shows us of it, and how he

shows it. But different as are the methods, the results may be the same. Thus, to take a single illustration only: the "interpretation of life" given directly in *In Memoriam* is, so far as the subject-matter corresponds, fundamentally the interpretation given obliquely, through story and character, in the *Idylls of the King*.

But now to return to our principal point. We have said that the definition of poetry as an interpretation of life is good so far as it goes, but that it fails by being incomplete. Taken as it stands, it is not specific enough; it does not mark poetry off from other kinds of interpretation. For science interprets life, philosophy interprets life. What, then, is the essential difference between the interpretations offered by science or philosophy, and the interpretation offered by poetry.

The business of the scientist in his laboratory is, from first to last, with things as they are in themselves. His dominant purpose is to ascertain fact as fact—to learn, in any given case, what *is*, and the processes by which it came to be as it is. In order to reach his generalizations and establish his laws, he observes with the most patient attention, he analyzes with the most scrupulous care, all the phenomena he can bring together for investigation; follows up every clue and suggestion; applies every test within his reach; and though, as an aid in his task, he may often frame tentative conclusions and hypotheses, he is never satisfied with such—never gives them out to the world, or regards them for himself, as more than tentative—but seeks always to substitute for them the reality of rigid and irrefragable proof. Now, such work obviously demands, before all things, a mind free from prejudice and prepossessions, a single eye for the matter in hand, reservation of judgment, and an absolute willingness to accept without hesitation or

demur whatever results inquiry may bring to light, though these may perchance run counter to long-accepted conclusions and deeply cherished beliefs. And herein lies, indeed, for all of us, the ultimate value of the discipline of science. We are thus taught, as we are taught effectively in no other way, to look steadily, watch patiently, discard mere assumptions, withhold decision, acknowledge ignorance; we thus learn the true meaning of evidence, and the difference between guesswork and proof.

All this is tantamount to saying that, to do his work thoroughly, the scientist, in his capacity of scientist, must seek for the time being to eliminate the personal factor, and to keep his intellectual powers insulated from all contact with the emotions. Ulterior questions concerning the real or supposed bearings of his discoveries and conclusions upon the world's life and progress, upon men's hopes and aspirations, religious beliefs and spiritual cravings, must be firmly set aside by him; his business being, as we say, simply with fact as fact—with things as in themselves they actually are. When Darwin, after many years of unremitting study, published the results of his investigations into the origin of species and the descent of man, he aroused a perfect storm of indignation and alarm in the religious world at large, the head and front of his offense being, not that his statements were incorrect, but that if correct, they would certainly prove fatal to many current ideas of man and his destiny, and the order and government of the universe. But Darwin might very properly have answered that with these current ideas he, as a biologist, had for the moment no kind of concern; that, in the subjects dealt with, he had done his best to find out what the facts really were; and that the only course open to those who objected to his conclusions was, not to denounce them as atheistic, but to show them to be unsound.

And this is the answer which the scientist may always give to those who accuse him of promulgating ugly or irreligious theories. In the long run we must accommodate ourselves to the facts of life; it were fatuous to expect the facts of life to accommodate themselves to us. Science is, after all, only another name for what we know about things, and the inferences we justifiably draw from that knowledge.

But though we have clearly no right, in dealing with the phenomenal universe, to allow our feelings to usurp the place of our intellect, and, making our wishes the guide to and test of truth, to construct out of them what Bacon called "sciences as one would"; we have every right to regard the world as we know it from the emotional as well as from the intellectual point of view; nor, indeed, can we really rest contented until we so regard it. The results of science, the universe of fact and law revealed by science, can never in themselves suffice for us, for the simple reason that we are not incarnated intellects or mere thinking machines, but complex human beings, with instincts and desires which no amount of mere knowledge will ever satisfy. It would be entirely wrong, for instance, to dismiss Darwin's theories respecting the descent of man because they do not appear to harmonize with our own faith in God and the high destinies of the human race. If they are true, we must accept them, come what may of it; if we reject them, it must be only because, having paid proper attention to Darwin's facts and arguments, we find ourselves committed to the conclusion that they are not true. But suppose they are true—what then? Is that the end of the whole matter? For the scientist as scientist it is the end of the whole matter; but for all of us, as men and women, it is by no means so. There still remains for us the vital question: How will the new facts and theories forced upon us by science —how will the new ideas of the processes at work in the uni-

verse, to which this fresh knowledge leads—relate themselves to those hopes and aspirations, those religious beliefs and spiritual cravings, of which we have spoken above? Sooner or later, this question must arise and demand from us some sort of answer. For it is a truth of the commonest experience that we do not and cannot live wholly in the sphere of the intellect, and that, by the imperative needs of our natures, we desire at all times to carry our knowledge over from the sphere of the intellect into the sphere of the feelings.

And now, we have come round to a point of view from which we should be able to understand a little more clearly our former distinction between science and poetry. While science is concerned only with the relations of things among themselves, poetry, like religion, deals with the relations of things to us. It translates the world of external reality into terms of the emotional life; or, as we have just put it, it carries knowledge over for us from the sphere of the intellect into the sphere of the feelings. Thus it is, in truth, at once the antithesis and the complement of science. The interpretation of life which science gives is the interpretation of the insulated intellect. The interpretation which poetry gives is the interpretation of the emotional and spiritual natures. And unless we are prepared to go so far as to maintain that the intellectual interpretation is all that we require or crave for, and that our emotional and spiritual natures have no just claim upon our consideration, it is evident that we were in nowise guilty of extravagance when we asserted that for human culture and development the discipline of poetry is quite as important as the discipline of physical culture.

Here, again, we may turn to Matthew Arnold to clinch the argument for us. In his essay on *Literature and Science* he showed that in a rough, general way human nature may be said to be built up out of four powers, which, with his

usual love of telling phraseology, he described as the power of conduct, the power of knowledge, the power of beauty, and the power of social life and manners. Now, by the power of conduct, Arnold really meant our religious and moral instincts; by the power of knowledge, our intellectual faculties; by the power of beauty, our æsthetic feelings; by the power of social life and manners, our disposition for social intercourse. And Arnold went on to show—what indeed will become manifest to anyone who thinks over the matter at all seriously—that as human life is really built up out of these various powers or instincts, we have need of them all for happiness or true success, and that in no proper system of education must they be left unnurtured and uncared for—must they be allowed to take their chance. Well, still in a rough and general way, we may say that our power of knowledge is nurtured and cared for by the discipline of science. But what about our instinct for conduct, our instinct for beauty—what about our religious sense, our æsthetic sense? These, we insist, are every whit as necessary for complete, well-ordered living as the sense for knowledge, the intellectual power itself; and with these science as science has little or nothing to do. How, then, shall they be nurtured and cared for? With Arnold we make answer—by the discipline afforded by humane letters, and especially by the discipline of poetry.

If we understand, then, that the essence of poetry lies in its power of emotional interpretation, its value and importance for us becomes self-evident. Outside or within the universe revealed by science—the universe of external fact and law—there is a universe which science will never reveal, and which it is not the function of science to reveal—the universe of beauty and of spiritual meanings; and the revelation of this universe is given through art, and in its

highest and most perfect form, through poetry. And what we call poetic imagination is, in reality, insight into this hidden universe—the "faculty divine" of seizing the emotional significance of things, of relating them to our religious sense and to our æsthetic sense. It is at this point, therefore, that we reach the true answer to the question with which we set out—What is it, after all, that poetry is supposed to do for us? By strengthening our own insight, our own power of seizing things on their emotional sides, it not only interprets for us, but it also enables us to interpret for ourselves, the universe of beauty and of spiritual meanings which, as we say, lies outside or within that universe of fact and law in which science finds at once its sphere and its limitations.

Arnold once spoke of Wordsworth as "a priest to us all of the wonder and bloom of the world." In his own measure and way every true poet possesses this thaumaturgic power—the power of unfolding to us the charm and glory of nature and the beauty and pathos of human joy and sorrow, of life and hope, of love and death. This is what Browning means when he calls poets the "makers-see," and Carlyle, when he writes of them as "gifted to discern the godlike mysteries of God's universe." "For the inexhaustible treasures of the world," says Coleridge, "in consequence of the film of familiarity and selfish solicitude, we have eyes, yet see not, ears that hear not, and hearts that neither feel nor understand." It is the special function and privilege of poetry to remove the film, to open our eyes and ears, to touch our hearts to feeling and comprehension. And it is because of our constant absorption in other interests, and the blindness and deafness and apathy in which we become only too easily accustomed to live, that our need of poetry is so immediate and so great. For as Browning puts it, through the mouth of his Fra Lippo Lippi,

> "For, don't you mark? we're made so that we love
> First when we see them painted, things we have pass'd
> Perhaps a hundred times, nor cared to see;
> And so they are better, painted—better to us,
> Which is the same thing. Art was given for that."

And what the painter justly says of his art, the poet may quite as justly, or even more justly, say of his own. Poetry, too, was given for that. A student of mine once told me that, though she had lived all her life by the sea, she had never realized, never felt its majesty and mystery and power, till she came to read Tennyson. She had walked the shore with unseeing eyes, and the ocean was a mere commonplace to her, though I dare say that she knew a great deal of what science has to tell about wave-formation and tidal ebb and flow; and thus the poet had lent her of his own eyesight, and the commonplace thing was commonplace no longer, but a thing of infinite loveliness and subtlest meaning. And this bit of frankly given experience might easily be paralleled, I am sure, by all of us who love poetry and have lived with it, if we would only be equally frank with ourselves. More than once or twice, when I have been in the company of painters, I have marvelled at the way in which their quick artistic vision has caught the possibilities of a picture in some scene which to me had, at the moment, no particular interest or attractiveness, but which, as they regarded it, was full of charm and color. Presently the picture was made, and then my marvel was that I had not at once detected all that I now saw of color and felt of charm in the painted landscape or the transcript from street life. And so such things were better painted—better, that is, for me; and this not simply because I *did* see them on the canvas as I had not seen them in reality, but also because the beauty I discovered in them when they were thus transferred to canvas helped me pres-

ently to regard reality for myself with something more of the artist's insight and power of comprehension. The service that poetry renders us is in likewise twofold: it not only reveals to us fresh beauty and unsuspected meaning in the world of nature and in the world of human experience; it also endows us with larger vision and keener sympathies, and thus develops within ourselves the latent faculty of poetic interpretation.

We are now, I hope, in a position to realize that the objections urged against poetry by zealous advocates of physical science and practical men whose attention is fixed wholly upon utilitarian standards of value, are, in truth, wide of the mark. The poet does not, indeed, furnish us with new "facts," does not, in their sense of the term, enlighten, or edify, or add to the sum-total of our positive knowledge of man or nature. I make no claims on his behalf to the possession of powers which do not properly belong to him, or on behalf of his work to a significance which is, in reality, quite foreign to its purpose and its scope. We should get more directly "useful information," I readily admit, from ten minutes' study of a cookery-book than from all the writings of Tennyson and Browning. But, then, my contention is, that life is not altogether made up of "useful information," and that the material and the discipline necessary for complete culture are not entirely to be found in all the scientific treatises and laboratories in the world. No matter how far science may carry us, there will still remain, over and above the utmost which it can accomplish for us through its discoveries and its discipline, imperative needs which it can never satisfy or even touch; and therefore, for the healthy and normal growth of our natures, and for the development within us of the power to get the most good out of life, the culture which poetry yields

must ever remain of urgent, indeed, of paramount, importance.

And now, when we once fully understand the true purpose and potency of the poet's work, we cease to be in any danger of falling into the common, but grave, mistake of making demands upon him which it is not his business to meet, and of then turning from him impatiently because he does not meet them. We must not, as we now see, require of the poet that he should instruct us in the principles and processes of the external universe, that he should present us with versified treatises on metaphysics, or theology, or biology, or social science. We must not regard him as preacher, lecturer, school-master. We ask of him primarily that he shall stir, vivify, inspire, and, above all (because properly speaking all else in his work is dependent upon this), that he shall delight. Words of maturest wisdom will often fall from his lips, for the great poets of the world are essentially thinkers as well as singers. But the supreme and vital significance of his thought lies, after all, not so much in the thought itself as in the emotional reach and power which he gives to it. The lesson of his song or story, if formal lesson there be, may count much for us, or may count little—that is a matter of minor importance. Very probably he will strike out no idea which, precipitated into abstract statement, will lead us to any novel theory of the universe, any fresh conception of man and his lot. The energy, the virtue, which flow in upon us from contact with him—the sense of renewed vitality which we carry away with us, after being in his company—the dilation of mind—the clearing of our spiritual atmosphere—the uplift of heart which comes from dwelling for a season in his world and from seeing things as he sees them: in all this we must seek the real worth and power of his verse. As we lay his book aside we may freely admit

that it would often be difficult and hazardous to attempt to summarize in a formal way the effect it has had upon us. We feel none the less that it has, in fact, done much. It has entered as a real force into our lives. It has taught us to see more and to feel more in the worlds of nature and humanity than we saw and felt before. It has quickened our sense of beauty. It has touched our hearts. It has braced or tempered, consoled or kindled, sweetened or inspired. We have gained from it, not in knowledge, but in emotional and spiritual power.

An appeal in such matters may surely be made from theory and argument directly to experience. Let anyone take any poem from one of the great poets—let him take, for example (where a hundred poems present themselves for choice, I mention haphazard the first few that come to mind), Wordsworth's *Lines written above Tintern Abbey*, or Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, or Whittier's *My Triumph*, or Browning's *Cleon*, or Tennyson's *Ulysses;* let him read and re-read the work he selects for test; linger over it; absorb it; and then let him answer frankly whether what I have said really overshoots the mark. I venture to prophesy that no one who gives the experiment a fair trial will afterward accuse me of extravagance.

Throughout the foregoing discussion of the aims and functions of poetry, it will be remarked that I have considered the poet's work wholly on the side of its subject-matter, and of its relation to our emotional and spiritual life. And if it should be objected by any lover of poetry that, in taking this course, I have erred by ignoring all questions of an æsthetic or technical character, and that what I have said must in consequence be pronounced partial and incomplete, I will freely plead guilty to the charge. For after all, as I should be among the first to insist, poetry is an art, and

must be treated as an art; that is, it must be studied for its form and texture, as well as for its spirit and matter, in order that its full power may be apprehended by us. Indeed, even from the point of view which we have here adopted, this fact is still of the greatest significance, since poetry touches and educates our sense of beauty not simply through its revelation of the beauty of the things it deals with, but also through its own beautiful way of dealing with these things. In making admission of seeming oversight, I have only to urge that I did not set out to write a comprehensive treatise on poetry, but merely to present one or two of its larger and more general claims upon our attention. And the points I have sought to make clear are, I think, precisely those which have the widest interest for us, and which yet at the same time, strangely enough, we find to be most commonly ignored.

It has been my object, then, as I stated at the first, to show that the study of poetry is an element of the utmost importance in the higher culture of our lives, and to point out, in a broad way, the kind of help it may properly be expected to give us. It remains for me now to try to relate what I have said to our own personal needs by offering a few suggestions on the reading of poetry. In what spirit, we must ask, and with what special ends in view, should we go to the poet if we desire that his work may prove of the fullest and most lasting value for us?

In any attempt to answer this question, either briefly or in detail, the first and last thing to remember is this—that the poet appeals to the poet within ourselves—to our own poetic faculty. In other words, the true secret of a poem can be seized and appropriated only by the exercise on the reader's part of an imaginative power similar in kind to that which originally gave the poem birth, however much it may fall short of such power in strength and vitality.

In a general, yet, let me insist, in a very real sense, most of us are, to some extent, poets; that is, we are most of us endowed with a certain measure of poetic feeling, though we may never try to give it formal expression, or, if we should so try, may not succeed in doing so, on account of lacking what Wordsworth calls "the accomplishment of verse." It is indeed true that in the large majority of cases this power is never allowed free play, and that it is often, even, consciously or unconsciously repressed. But the fact remains that average, well-constituted men and women do possess some imagination, some love of beauty in nature and art, some sense of the wonder and charm of life and the pathos and mystery of death. And this is all I mean when I assert that we are most of us to some extent poets. To feel these things, in however feeble and transitory a way, is to be to that degree a poet.

Well, it is precisely this emotional and imaginative power —this power of realizing both the sensuous beauty of the universe and its spiritual meanings—which has to be exercised and strengthened; for through this power, and through this power alone, is the true approach to poetry to be found. Here, as elsewhere in culture, it is profoundly certain that we must carry out the wealth of the Indies if we would bring back the wealth of the Indies as our possession. We go to the poet in vain unless we are able and willing to take with us something of the poetic virtue and energy which generated and still permeate his work.

But how, then, is our emotional and imaginative power to be exercised and strengthened? The answer is simple—by generously and responsively laying ourselves open to whatsoever the world has to offer us of sensuous beauty and spiritual meaning; but in particular, since, as we remember, "art was given for that," by putting ourselves as closely

and sympathetically as possible into vital touch with the master-poets themselves—with those interpreters of sensuous beauty and spiritual meaning who, having seen deepest and felt most intensely, have also been privileged to give account to others of what they have seen and felt.

But all this, it may be urged, does not carry us very far, since it seems practically equivalent to saying that if we would learn how to read poetry we must begin by—reading poetry. My reply is, that this is precisely my meaning; though, properly understood, it will be found to take us very far indeed. It is the poetic faculty itself that we must seek to cultivate; and it is poetry that will best cultivate it for us. Only the point that I want most strenuously to insist upon is, that all our reading of poetry will be of no avail —will give us nothing of the satisfaction, the solace, the keen delight which it should yield—will, therefore, do little or nothing for us toward the development of our imaginative and emotional power—unless we read it *as poetry;* unless humbly, yet resolutely, we do our best to take the poet's own point of view, enter with our whole heart into his thoughts and feelings, and make ourselves partakers with him in his "vision" and his "faculty divine." It has been well said that those only can hope to understand Danté to the full who have known something of Danté's experience. Those only can hope to reach an adequate understanding of any poet who can in such wise respond to his genius and identify themselves with his passion, as that their own reading of his written words becomes, as it were, a re-creation on their parts of the poem which they thus absorb into their lives.

My reference to Danté reminds me of a story I heard only the other day, and by which I was greatly impressed. It was the story of a young man—a poor college student—

who during a summer vacation went out into the country to earn money for the following year by working in the fields. He carried with him one book—a copy of an English translation of *The Divine Comedy.* When the labors of the day were over, and supper eaten, he would read in this book for an hour or two before going to bed; and then at his work the next day he would think over and over again of what he had read the night before, recalling the passages which had particularly struck him, repeating aloud to the trees and the sky the lines which had clung to his memory, and allowing the whole to sink slowly into his mind and mingle there with all that was deepest and most sacred in his own thoughts and feelings about God, and the world, and man. I do not for a moment suppose that his knowledge of Danté's epoch and contemporaries, and of the complex details of the political feuds of the time, was very wide or accurate; and I dare say that there were many minor matters of great interest and significance which wholly escaped him. But I am none the less quite sure that his reading of Danté did something for him which would never have been done in the college class-room—I am quite sure that it made *The Divine Comedy* a personal possession to him—a real living book, throbbing with the deepest emotion—a genuine record of human suffering, and struggle, and triumph.

Now, what this young student did with his Danté, we may do for ourselves with any great poet, if we will only give ourselves up to him in the same responsive spirit, and show the same patience, the same quickening sympathy, the same desire to find a way to the very heart and brain of his work. But to get into such personal and vital relationship with any of the masters, we must offer to him the very best that is in ourselves. Only then can we expect that he shall yield us of his best. Mere passive reading—the listless drifting of

the mind along the current of his verse—can serve us little, if we aim at something more than the killing of an idle hour. We must be alert and receptive; ready to catch fire at a word; passionately alive to the play of his imagination upon our own. We must co-operate with him, lending him of our own energy and power. In a word—because it all comes back to this—we must reach his secret, and assimilate it by the active exercise of our own poetic power.

And thus to absorb poetry—to take it into our brain and blood, and make it verily and lastingly our own—is the true and ultimate purpose of all our reading of poetry—a purpose which we should never for a moment leave out of view; this, and not what is called scholarship; this, and not the development of our powers of analysis and criticism. To know all that there is to know *about* a poet or a poem, is one thing; to know the poet and the poem, altogether another. It is direct fellowship, individual friendship, that is to be our ideal; and we must rest satisfied with nothing less. Take a poem familiar to every reader—the *Elegy* of Gray. Any text-book will tell us something about Gray's life and writings; will indicate his relations to the literary movements and changes of his time; will explain a great many things which it is desirable, and a great many other things which it is quite unnecessary for us to know; will clear up historical references, and even discuss questions of verse-structure and syntax. Well—and, meanwhile, what about the poem? Do we know it as a poem? Do we feel it and realize it? Have we really made it ours—a possession forever? It is more than possible—it is only too probable—that in spite of all our learning and all our text-book drill, the answer must be No; only too probable that we are still outsiders. What then? I think our young student who read *The Divine Comedy* for himself and lived in it, could

tell us what then. I think, if we asked him, that he could give us a key to the *Elegy*, which all our painfully acquired scholarship, all our trained critical acumen, all our ability to pass with distinction any number of examinations on Gray and his epoch, would never put into our hands.

It is not to be inferred that I am advocating, or even suggesting, a lax, unintelligent reading of poetry. Certainly I have nothing to say against literary scholarship in its proper place; against critical discipline in its proper place. And in the reading of any poem it is quite likely that scholarship and critical insight may be of real service to us. For we have to keep pace with our poet's mind; and to do this, we must be able as well as willing to follow wherever he may lead. We need, therefore, the understanding brain no less than the responsive heart. Nay, there are times when, unless we rise to the level of his learning—unless his words are instinct for us with the erudite meanings they bore to him—our poet will speak to us in an unknown tongue. The language of literature is a complex and highly condensed language; it is largely made up of reminiscences and allusions; because it has gathered up and preserved—sometimes in definite phrase, sometimes in the merest hint or innuendo—the accumulated experiences of the ages, their manners, customs, history, philosophy, written and unwritten lore. It is thus a language of implication and symbol, to be comprehended to the full by those only who can catch its latent significance, and in whose minds a word dropped by the way suffices to fire a long train of memories and associations. Take one or two examples of the simplest kind. Take Milton's lines in *Il Penseroso:*

> "Sometime let gorgeous Tragedy,
> In sceptred pall, come sweeping by,

> Presenting Thebes, or Pelops' line,
> Or the tale of Troy divine.
> Or what (though rare) of later age
> Ennobled hath the buskined stage";

or the familiar stanza in the *Elegy:*

> "Some village Hampden, that with dauntless breast
> The little tyrant of his fields withstood;
> Some mute, inglorious Milton here may rest;
> Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood";

or Keats's reference to Ruth,

> "when, sick for home,
> She stood in tears amid the alien corn";

or Tennyson's line about

"Hesper, whom the poet call'd the Bringer-home of all good things."

These are passages cited at random, but they serve to point my moral. For it will be seen at once that we cannot be said really to understand them, unless we understand, not what they mean to us on a first or second reading, but what they meant to their writers when they were penned. We have to draw, then, upon Milton's vast classical learning, and upon Gray's knowledge of English history. We have to remember that Keats was thinking of that beautiful and pathetic old-world story of the Moabite girl who went gleaning in the fields of Boaz; and if we do not know the story, or if it has grown faint for us, how can we feel, as the poet felt, her homesickness, or realize the intense meaning of that wonderful epithet, the "alien" corn? We have to follow Tennyson's reference to Byron, and shall only be able to appreciate its subtle beauty of reminiscence if we, too, can recall the lines which lingered in his memory as he wrote:

> "O Hesperus! thou bringest all good things—
> Home to the weary, to the hungry cheer,
> To the young bird the parent's brooding wings,
> The welcome stall to the o'erlabor'd steer,
> Whate'er of peace about our hearthstone clings,
> Whate'er our household gods protect of dear,
> Are gather'd round us by thy look of rest;
> Thou bring'st the child, too, to the mother's breast."

It would be the height of folly, therefore, to depreciate scholarship, or to dismiss it as a matter of little or no account. Clearly enough it may render us great service; we may go further and say that it would not be easy to exaggerate its value. And thus, in our study there will often be place for such aids as the editor and the commentator may furnish us to eke out our own lack of knowledge, and even for those critical "barnacles" which are called "notes." But we must still be careful to discriminate between the learning which enlightens and stimulates, and the learning which only stifles and clogs. Our first and last purpose, as we must always remember, is to cultivate the power of reading and appreciating poetry as poetry. Whatever does not help us to the achievement of this purpose—whatever does not take us into closer and deeper personal sympathy with the poet and his work—no matter how important it may be in its own time and for its own sake—must be regarded as impertinent and inopportune. Do not let us, then, confound means with ends—the thing which is primary and essential with things which are secondary and subordinate. And in our reading of poetry, it can never be too often or too urgently repeated, mere scholarship is but secondary and subordinate, to be prized for all the assistance it may yield us in our special undertaking, but never to be allowed to usurp the place of the end it should help to subserve—never to be permitted, as

it is too often permitted, to be made an object in itself. In an age which is only too inclined to magnify research, to accumulate facts, arrange, classify, generalize, there is constant danger lest we should treat literature as scarcely more than the subject-matter for scientific observation and analysis. Let us, then, be on our guard. If poetry is really to be of living meaning and value for us, it must still be through the spirit and not through the letter. The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.

And now there are one or two words of practical advice which I should like to add for the benefit of any chance reader of these pages who may wish to put the foregoing suggestions to the test.

In the first place, go to each poet for what he is individually able to give you, and do not fall into the common but graceless habit of complaining that he does not give you something else. You will not find in the work of Keats what you will find in the work of Browning, or in the work of Browning what you will find in the work of Keats. Yet both Browning and Keats have to offer you of the best. In what William Morris called the "mood of energy" there are poets who will satisfy you to whom you would never naturally turn in the "mood of idleness"; in the "mood of idleness" there are others who will furnish you delightful companionship, but who would help you but little in the "mood of energy." Art will minister to the strenuous hour and to the hour of relaxation; but you must learn for yourself where to seek the needed ministration. And when you read—be your selected volume what it may—do your utmost to abandon yourself to the spirit of your author, to share his emotion, to partake of his vision; allow your imagination to play freely about his verses; generously expand them, as Gaston de Latour, in

Pater's beautiful story, did with the writings of Ronsard, to the full measure of their intention. Read for the pleasure of reading, and do not watch yourself overcuriously, or disturb yourself greatly about results. Trust to the unconscious growth of the spirit. You cannot weigh or estimate the influence of poetry; you may never be able to say exactly to what extent or by what means you are the better for it. But you cannot formulate all you have gained from the sunsets you have seen, the roses that have clustered about your windows, the music you have heard. Let it suffice that you may hold fast to your faith that you *are* the better for such things. Turn criticism to account by trying for yourself to discover what it is that has made the great poems of the world seem so great and wonderful to others. The words of the commentators will often help you by directing your own thought and stimulating your own appreciation. But recollect that, after all, in these intimately personal matters, no one can do very much for you. You must at last depend upon yourself, and work out your own salvation. Above all, never lose sight of the fundamental and essential relationship of poetry and life. "Art," as Mr. Mallock has finely said, "is a reflection, a reproduction of the pleasures of life, and is altogether relative to these. . . . We should, for instance, take no interest in portraits unless we took some interest in the human face. We should take none in statues, if we took none in the human form. We must know something of love as a feeling, or we should never care for love-songs. Art may send us back to these with intenser appreciation of them, but we must bring to art from life the appreciation we want intensified. Art is a factor in common human happiness, because by its means common men are made partakers in the vision of uncommon men. Great art is a speculum

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